

# Rites of Passage

## Birth and Childhood

The first words a Muslim baby hears is the *shahada*, the first pillar of Islam:

“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”

Although circumcision is not mentioned in the *Koran*, it usually takes place—along with a celebration—shortly after birth. In some Muslim countries, it occurs either around the age of ten or when the boy can recite the *Koran* by memory.

It is customary to name the newborn seven days after birth. Devout Muslims observe a ceremony called the *Aqiqa*. A child's head is shaved, and he or she is given a Muslim name. Most commonly, the child is named after a revered figure. Many boys, of course, are named Muhammad. Others adopt names of the caliphs. Girls are often named Khadijah, after Muhammad's first wife, or Fatimah, one of his daughters.

The *Koran* is central to the education of a Muslim. At an early age they begin reciting from the scripture and memorizing common prayers. The most popular phrase translates, “in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.” These words are used as daily prayers, when entering structures, and before meals. In fact, each chapter of the *Koran* begins with this phrase.

## Marriage

As in most religious communities, marriage and family are an essential part of Islam. Moreover, marriage is viewed as the union of both families as well as the individuals.

Traditionally, marriages were arranged by families, although more contemporary Muslims are choosing their own mates. Another traditional practice that is being questioned is polygamy, or the practice of a man marrying more than one wife. According to the *Koran*, a man may marry up to four wives as long as he can treat them equally. (Muhammad himself had four wives). However, polygamy is a subject of much debate.

Though the marriage ceremony is simple, the celebrations are elaborate and joyous. Families extend themselves to provide the proper environment, often including the local Muslim community and extending through the night. It is still common, however, for men and women to celebrate separately.

## Death

“Has He who created the heavens and the earth no power to create their like? That He surely has. He is the all-knowing Creator. When He decrees a thing He need only say: ‘Be,’ and it is.” (36.81-83)

Passages such as these, from the 36th surah of the *Koran*, are recited in the final hours of a Muslim's life. For Muslims, death is regarded as a release from the suffering of life until the Last Judgment. Thus, recitations such as these comfort and inspire the dying.

Following a death, the corpse is prepared for burial by a ritual washing and being wrapped in a white sheet. The funeral service consists of some simple prayers, and the Muslim burial takes place quickly and without extravagance. A coffin is not required, and a procession carries the deceased to the grave. As expected, it is essential that the head of the deceased point in the direction of the Ka'bah in Mecca. Normally, the grave has no marker or headstone.